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Paris Spies: Shady Past Of Agency

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GENEVA, Sept. 22 — The Greenpeace scandal is only the latest of many that have shaken the French secret service since the end of World War II, embarrassing governments and leading to mass ousters of personnel and other attempts to tighten political control over the agency.

The General Directorate for External Security, as the French secret intelligence service is called, is an organization traditionally dominated by the military. Many French officials concede it has earned a reputation for strong-arm tactics.

The Prime Minister's acknowledgement today that the secret sevice had indeed been involved in the attack means the Greenpeace scandal could eclipse in gravity the well-known Ben Barka affair of 1965-66.

Then, suspicion that its agents had helped kidnap and kill the Moroccan opposition leader Mehdi Ben Barka while he was in Paris, brought the full wrath of Charles deGaulle down on the troubled service. Denouncing it as "vulgar and subaltern" he dismissed its director, Gen. Paul Jacquier, dissolved the covert operations division and put the whole organization under direct control of the Defense Ministry.

The Greenpeace scandal has erupted at a time when President François Mitterrand's Government has been making vigorous efforts to change the secret service and establish tighter political control over it.

The Socialists, who have traditionally been suspicious of the agency as being a rightist organization with a taste for meddling in domestic politics, moved quickly to purge and overhaul the Service for External Documentation and Counterespionage, as it was then called, when they came to power in 1981.

Count Alexandre de Marenches, who had run the service for a decade and had some success at taking it in hand, was replaced by Pierre Marion, a friend of Defense Minister Charles Hernu and a fellow freemason who had no intelligence experience.

Mr. Marion immediately embarked on a purge of top officers suspected of being unsympathetic to the left, removing at least 50, according to a new study of the service by Roger Faligot and Pascal Krop titled "La Piscine," the nickname given to the secret service's barracks-like Paris headquarters on Boulevard Mortier close to a public swimming pool.

At the same time, he reorganized the service along more centralized lines, limiting the independence of its divisions.

The shake-up alienated many staff members, and French reports assert that as many as 500 of the service's 3,000 employes at its headquarters left, as well as many of the foreign agents, who are traditionally called "honorable correspondents." According to a recent survey of the service by L'Express magazine, "whole spy rings collapsed."

Agency morale suffered and efficiency declined. The Faligot-Krop book reports that Mr. Mitterrand was infuriated in October 1981 when the agency could not assess a wire service report saying Libya had invaded Chad because its agents were out of contact. In 1982, agency officers were reportedly involved, against orders, in a failed coup in the Central African Republic.

Official discontent with the service's work increased. In 1982 the Socialists changed its name to the current one and gave it a new charter. Like the Central Intelligence Agency, it was banned from operating on domestic soil and its top priorities were defined as penetrating Soviet targets, gathering economic intelligence and fighting terrorism.

Later that year Gen. Jeannou Lacaze, the French Chief of Staff, again complained about the agency's poor performance, forcing Defense Minister Hernu to replace Mr. Marion with Adm. Pierre Lacoste. At his swearing-in ceremony, according to the Faligot-Krop study, Mr. Hernu stressed that as a military man Admiral Lacoste was expected to take orders only from him.

"The hierarchy must and will be respected," Mr. Hernu said. "To obey and be accountable, those are the pillars of your service."

Despite this strengthening of political control, some French intelligence experts are attributing the Greenpeace fiasco to the Socialists' changes, which they say weakened the agency.

In a recent interview, Jean Rochet, head of the Directorate for Territorial Surveillance, France's counterespionage organization, said: "I know the departure of de Marenches was followed by a purge because of fears of infiltration by the extreme right. But I wonder if the purge simply got rid of people who knew how to do their job."

The French secret service appears to owe its reputation for roughness and its taste for political intrigue to close links with the military, a lack of funds and deep involvement in France's internally divisive struggle over Vietnam and Algeria.

Although neither agency's budget has been published, the French secret service is certainly much smaller than the C.I.A. and is worse equipped. Mr. Marion says it had no computers until he arrived. The Faligot-Krop book says a major handicap is the agency's difficulty in recruiting good civilian staffs, which forces it to rely on military personnel.

Not Like 'the Anglo-Saxons'

"The chronic problem of the French secret service," they say, "is that, unlike the Anglo-Saxons, it has been unable to recruit scientists, economists and linguists on campuses."

In the 1950's, the service's action branch was built up into a formidable counterinsurgency force operating against nationalist guerrillas in Vietnam and Algeria.

The list of strong-arm operations widely attributed to the French secret service since then includes these:

¶The sinking of at least 14 ships carrying arms to the Algerian rebels by an organization calling itself the "Main Rouge" or "Red Hand" — as well as the slayings of two prominent German arms dealers, George Puchert in Frankfurt in 1952 and Marcel Léopold in Geneva in 1959.

¶The poisoning of Félix Moumié, a Cameroonian opposition leader, in Geneva in 1960.

¶The capture of Ahmed Ben Bella and other Algerian revolutionary leaders after the plane they were on, which belonged to Sultan Mohammed V of Morocco, was forced down while in flight in 1956. The episode led to the resignation of Prime Minister Guy Mollet.

¶The sabotaging of the motor of the Trident, an ecological group's ship, in 1966 when it was trying to disrupt a French weapons test in the atmosphere above the Pacific, and the detention of the same vessel the next year on health grounds by the Cook Island authorities after a crew member suddenly developed a contagious disease.

¶A failed army coup against Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, the Libyan leader, in August 1980, which was followed by the resignation of several top French secret service officers.

The service was built up after World War II by veterans of the struggle against the Nazi occupation, which had known few rules. In 1946 its first director, André Dewavrin, a Resistance hero, was removed after being accused of stealing secret funds.